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ABSTRACT

Process, not facts; objective analysis and evaluation, not emotional and uncritical patriotism: these are the emphases of the new social studies and history materials. Curriculum designers of the 1950's reflected that decade's belief that there is a nature to things and that the discipline learned while using inquiry methods helps students become better learners of the nature of things. However, today's students may no longer believe there is a nature of things. They question traditional modes of cognition, intellectualizing, or "objectifying," and suggest there is more to a situation than its intellectual abstractions. There "hip" idiom suggests alternative ways of perceiving and thinking about the world, and they decry making a fetish of objectivity in subjects toward which people are not objective. "Can a style of learning suited for the students of the 'cool fifties' speak to the children of the age of Aquarius?" (DJB)

EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF AQUARIUS

by Edmund Traverso

Thomas Newman

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New social studies and history materials are diverse in subject and content but have one thing in common. They all invite students to inquire into a body of evidence in much the same way as a scholar working in the discipline does. Yet with increasing frequency the feedback I get from teachers who are using these materials in their classes is that a noticeable portion of students are turning the invitations down cold or are at best reluctant guests at the banquet tables of inquiry and discovery.

What is happening in classrooms is evidenced at Amherst Project workshops. We have noted increasingly occasions where the excitement generated the first day, when students perceive a question or issue and freely hypothesize on the basis of their own experiences and feelings, rapidly dissipates on succeeding days. Some students balk at rigorously pursuing answers in new evidence presented in following assignments. They seem to distrust the practice of being objective and resorting to intellectual skills. They question whether application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation are meaningful ways of dealing with the issues and questions raised at the start of their study. Their distrust echoes the idea expressed by the rock group, "Mothers of Invention" in their popular parody:

What's the ugliest
Part of your body?
Some say your nose
Some say your toes
But I think it's your MIND.

These lyrics may well pinpoint the reason for the widening gap between the designers of new social studies and history materials and today's students. The quintessential ideas that shape the new materials are those of the 1950's. Eisenhower was in the White House, and the popular phrases were "stay cool," "hang-loose," "no sweat," "under-control," and "made-in-the-shade." The stance suggested by these phrases, when you think of it, is but the other side of the coin of Bruner's scholar as the proper model for the learner. After all, whose whose stance is less frantic than that of the scholar? Who more than scholars consider the "mind" to be the least ugly part of the body?

The origins of the Amherst Project are a case in point. As is the case with many of the projects whose materials are now available, it started in the "cool fifties." A group of college and high school teachers met to discuss the status of American history in the schools. Over martinis we decided that much was wrong with the state of the art. The criticism leveled was, in retrospect, almost entirely in terms of what Bloom has called the cognitive domain, though I doubt it anyone present was familiar with the then recently published Taxonomy. The college men present stated that freshmen were unsophisticated when dealing with historical evidence. They couldn't analyze, synthesize, or reserve judgments. They had no notion of how historians thought. They weren't hard-headed. They couldn't doubt. The suggestion offered was, in retrospect, almost all in terms that were to be used in Bruner's Process of Education, though that book had not yet been published. Rather than stressing facts, mastery of the text, high school courses should stress process. Rather than emphasizing

an emotional and uncritical patriotism, courses should stress detached analysis and evaluation. Students should learn to think as historians. They should cope with evidence, real evidence, with sophistication and style.

In the era of Dave Brubeck's cool jazz the originators of the Amherst Project produced materials which it was hoped, would square what happened in high school classes with the nature of the discipline. Students would be given materials that would invite them to do history rather than memorize the answers of previous historians. Units on Jacksonian Democracy and The Progressives hit students with thirty or more random documents on the first day. They were asked to impose an intellectual order upon them and be able to defend their arrangement.

The materials and approach have come a long way since then. The content or point of the units is more relevant, the design more open-ended. Livelier and more varied types of evidence are included. The uses to which the evidence can be put suggest a larger view of history than the dispassionate creation of order out of chaos. We no longer argue that there is any particular merit in having students think like historians. Still, given these improvements, our units and those of most social studies projects continue to reflect a belief that there is a nature to things and that the discipline and the use of its mode of inquiry can help students be better learners of the nature of things.

Do today's students believe in an inquiry into the nature of things?

It may be that students no longer buy these notions. Their style and stance in the sixties differs radically from those of the fifties. To be sure changes were occurring in those immediate post Korean war years, Kerouac and the "beats" were on the road, and Bill Haley's Comets were beginning to roll. But awareness was still limited. People still read the novel first and then saw the movie later. The "Gutenberg Galaxy" had not fully given way to "electric-circuitry" and television. We had not gotten caught up as McLuhan suggests in the "all-at-onceness" of the situation. It was the sixties before the message was really heard and felt. When it was heard, it suggested that Paul Goodman recently pointed out, "The young discredit. . .the whole notion of 'disciplines' and academic learning. . .Suddenly I realized that they did not really believe that there was a nature of things."¹

Of course psychedelic art, rock, and electronics are not in themselves the causes of the stance of the young. These manifestations stem from the same general conditions that produce the stance and, at the same time, suggest that there are alternative ways of perceiving and thinking about things. Clearly, a part of this stance taken by youth is a distrust for traditional modes of cognition, intellectualizing, or "objectifying" the situation. These modes have been used to justify the horror and absurdity we see about us. A new "hip" idiom has grown to embody these feelings: "blow-your-mind," "out-a-sight," "diggin-the-vibes." All these expressions suggest that there is more to a situation than its intellectual abstractions. These expressions are suggesting that there are alternative ways of perceiving the world. Furthermore, they claim that experiences ranging from the street people of Berkeley to the flower people of Woodstock have proven to them that the scholar has no monopoly on learning.

¹Paul Goodman, "Alienated Youth: Whither Bound?," Sunday Herald Traveler Magazine (Herald Traveler Corp., Boston, September 28, 1969), 6.

Harvard freshman Steve Kalman wrote an article which appeared in The Saturday Evening Post entitled "You Force Kids to Rebel." In it he urged educators to stop avoiding human problems. According to Kalman, human problems are, after all, the ones which are of most concern to students. They are problems which involve not only objective facts, but subjective feelings and emotions. In his article the young Harvard student made his plea for relevance as a way to prevent student attitudes of dissatisfaction and rebellion:

What can be done to prevent this revolt against the future?
Actually what is really needed is a revamping of the way we are caught. One suggestion might be to drop our fetish with 'objectivity' in subjects toward which we are not objective. Politics are not objective. Love is not objective. People are not objective.

The increased use of media in new social studies and history materials is not in and of itself a solution. Students quickly perceive that it is there for the same reasons as printed documents, and they turn off. The crisis facing all of us as material designers boils down to these questions. How can people committed to a way of learning based upon belief in the nature of things, the efficiency of disciplines, and the primary use of print-oriented modes of cognition produce learning experiences for students who deny these things. Can a style of learning suited for the students of the "cool fifties" speak to the children of the age of Aquarius?

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